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Editor's note: Jean Andrews' article on Leroy Colombo will appear in two parts. Part II will run in the January 2011 issue.

***Leroy Colombo: The Deaf Lifeguard of Galveston Island
Part I: The Early Years (1905 – 1943)***

BY JEAN F. ANDREWS

Of all the lifeguards who patrolled the beaches of Galveston Island, none was more courageous, charismatic and colorful than Leroy Colombo. Deaf from the age of seven, Colombo spent his youth and most of his adult life as a volunteer lifeguard. Colombo was an indefatigable lifesaver (rescuing more than nine hundred people from near-drowning deaths over four decades),¹ a gifted athlete winning numerous trophies and medals for sea water racing, a surfboard acrobat, and diver who charmed hundreds of Galveston locals and tourists. He was also a generous humanitarian. His own words best sum up the man-- his intelligence, vitality, and decency.

"I not worry about my life. I go in lot dangerous and saved two firemen on top of E.S. Building used be hardware store. I do not give a damn about my life. I almost drown 16 times. God is always with me all the time—I save Negro or Mexican or White people. I am not letting no damn people let color people drown. I saved dog life got \$25 reward at Balinese room. Will still save anybody life anytime. I do not make any different. Mr. D. tell me stay out of water & I do not stay. I am still expert swimmer."²

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What does Colombo's life reveal about the beach town of Galveston when it was the "Riviera of the South," built around a daytime 'physical culture' of the beach--tanning, swimming, seawater races, surfing and bathing suit pageants, and a night life of amusement parks, drinking, eating, dancing, and gambling at clubs and casinos build on pleasure piers on stilts over the gulf? How did his early boyhood, his deafness and enrollment at the Texas School for the Deaf, as well as his young adult experiences on the beaches of Galveston shape his identity as a lifeguard, athlete and member of the Deaf community?³

In Part I, I examine Colombo's boyhood years where he was born into a large Italian-American immigrant family of eight children. I describe how his family suffered twin tragedies: he became deaf from spinal meningitis in 1912, and his father died young of a heart attack in 1913. Colombo's life was even more life-altering when he enrolled in boarding school in 1917 at the Texas School for the Deaf in Austin. Here he learned American Sign Language (ASL), joined the Deaf culture, and formed a Deaf identity which would support and sustain him throughout his life.

Part I provides a foundation for understanding Colombo. How does Colombo's early boyhood and young adult life experiences shape his identity as an expert swimmer and lifeguard? How does his entry into the Texas School for the Deaf shape his identity as a Deaf person? I conclude in Part I and Part II that there existed a symbiotic relationship between the man Leroy Colombo and Galveston's civic leaders. The city's economic need for a "safe beach environment" to attract more tourists to the "Riviera of the South" during 1920s to the 1940s motivated the city's leaders to create a super-human character in hyperbolic prose in the newspapers. Indeed, his lifeguarding skills and athletic prowess united the city of Galveston much like the Olympic Games do for countries that are typically enmeshed in petty divisive politics, which plagued Galveston throughout its early development as a city.⁴ In turn, the city of Galveston gave Colombo his identity as a highly successful lifeguard-athlete even though the city did not pay him for the majority of his lifeguard life. Indeed, beaches in Galveston, New Jersey, and California were the first to transition from

volunteer to paid lifeguards in order to protect tourists from drowning.⁵

The Deaf community also gave Colombo an identity, a language and an education—all of which sustained him throughout his life—an idea I develop in both Part I and Part II through interviews with Deaf and hearing Texans who knew the man, loved him, and admired him.

Colombo was “BOI,” an acronym that is affectionately used for native Galvestonians or those “born on the island.”⁶ He spent all but six years of his life on Galveston, a barrier island on the Texas Gulf coast twenty-seven miles long and three miles wide located fifty miles south of Houston. For six years (1917 – 1922), he lived at a boarding school in Austin, at the Texas School for the Deaf. Returning to Galveston at age seventeen, he continued his contact with deaf friends and deaf athletes who frequently came to Galveston to visit Colombo, to watch him race and play sports, and to picnic and swim at the beach.⁷ He joined Deaf sporting clubs and would travel frequently to Houston and Dallas for fellowship and to meet and compete with other Deaf sportsmen.

City records show Colombo was born at St. Mary’s Hospital on December 23, 1905 to Catherine Gaido Colombo and Peter Colombo. Christened Peter Leroy Colombo, he was one of eight children.⁸ When he arrived home as an infant, he was greeted by four sisters and one brother on 1713 21st Street, a house that is still standing, purportedly being built prior to 1903.⁹

When Colombo was born in 1905, Galveston was a major deepwater port with steamers, freighters, and sailing ships all docked at its wharves. The city boasted a population of more than 25,000 people,¹⁰ and as a vacation spot it attracted thousands of tourists seeking relief from the southern cities’ oppressive summer heat. “Surf bathing in the Gulf became the number one attraction; one weekend in 1910, trains delivered more than six thousand visitors to Galveston from every part of Texas.”¹¹ With rapid increases in tourism emerged the need for additional lifeguards, like Colombo, to patrol Galveston’s beaches.

Colombo’s family came from Italian-American Catholic immigrant roots. His father, Peter Colombo (1863-1913) and

his mother, Catherine Gaido Colombo (1873-1944) were born and emigrated from Italy: his mother from Torino and his father from Milan.¹² The Colombos, like other Italian immigrants, came to the island because of its economic opportunities in fishing, shipbuilding, farming, restaurant, meat-market, retail, candy, fruit stores, grocery businesses, barber shops, and shoe shops.¹³ By 1920, thousands of Italians had immigrated to Texas, and worked in the cattle industry in Dallas and West Texas, the retail and business industries in San Antonio and Houston, and in the sawmills or oil refineries in Beaumont and Port Arthur.¹⁴ In the words of historian, Valentine J. Belfiglio, Galveston was the "Ellis Island of the West" and Colombo's large extended Italian family were part of this western immigration surge.

The majority of Italians who immigrated to Galveston were Catholics. In keeping with strict Catholic dogma and ritual, Peter and Catherine Colombo had a large family of eight children who were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church faith: Lucie (b. 1894), Marie Antoinette (b. 1898), Esther (b. 1901), Margaret (b. 1901), Christopher Nicholas (b. 1903), Peter Leroy (b. 1905), San Jacinto (b. 1907) and Catherine (b. 1909). Colombo received the sacrament of Baptism on April 29, 1906 at St. Mary's Cathedral.¹⁵ While growing up, Colombo's family followed a southern and Catholic tradition of attending Mass together, followed by a large Italian meal with extended family typically held at his uncle's house (Uncle "Cinto") and later at his brother Nick Colombo's home. One of Colombo's cousins remembers this:

"I remember Leroy when he came to family functions. I was a boy about eight years old. I had trouble understanding his speech. Some of his speech was intelligible. He used lots of profanity! When he got mad, he would put his fist in his hand or beat his fist against his chest. I remember he was a champion swimmer. We had short conversations, he never signed to me. He used lots of Italian gestures."¹⁶

Like many Italian-American immigrants, Colombo's father, Peter, was a restaurant owner and manager. From

1903 to 1904, he was the proprietor of Elite Restaurant on 812 29th Street. He was also owner of the Roof Garden and Café over Murdoch's Bath House from 1906 to 1907, and the Chutes Park restaurant at Galveston Beach from 1909 to 1910.¹⁷ The Chutes provided Galveston with the reputation of being "The Coney Island of the South."¹⁸

Managing restaurants ran in Colombo's large extended Italian-American family. Colombo's mother, Catherine Gaido Colombo was the sister of San Jacinto Gaido (1887-1939). "San Jacinto came to Galveston with his parents when he was two. He became one of the biggest boosters of the Galveston beachfront."¹⁹ San Jacinto established a seafood canteen—Gaido's Café—on Murdoch's Pleasure Pier in 1911.²⁰

Gaido's Seafood Restaurant is still in existence today at Seawall Boulevard at 38th Street and his descendents still manage it.²¹ San Jacinto Gaido advised his sister to send her deaf son to Austin to the School for the Deaf in 1917. Colombo's enrollment at the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) would become a major turning point in the young Colombo's life: his entry point into the Deaf community after he lost his hearing from a childhood illness at age seven, providing him with lifelong contacts, friends, and fellow athletes.

Colombo may have experienced bacterial meningitis based on his symptoms of high fever. During this time in 1912, it was probably treated at home with quarantine, bed rest, and plenty of fluids. When asked in an interview if he went to the hospital when he became sick, Colombo replied, "No. Mama rocked me day and night. I had epileptic attacks."²²

Professor James Baer, a researcher and clinical audiologist found that there was a cerebrospinal meningitis epidemic that descended on Texas and Louisiana beginning in 1911 and ending in 1912. According to Dr. Baer, during this time a Russian doctor, Abraham Sophian, trained at Cornell University, came to Dallas carrying a horse immune serum that contained antibodies to the meningitis bacteria responsible for cerebromeningitis. There were eighty-three cases reported in Galveston to receive the serum with an almost twenty-five percent morbidity rate. Almost two

thousand cases of meningitis in Texas were reported and of the 562 who received no serum, approximately seventy-seven percent died.²³ No records exist on whether or not Colombo received the horse serum or not. As there were no antibiotics available in the early 20th century, treatment for meningitis at best was centered on quarantine, bed rest, application of salt solution to the throat and nose, plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration, and the horse serum—if it was available.²⁴

Spinal meningitis can attack the hearing mechanism causing deafness, and the disease can also attack other parts of the brain causing blindness, paralysis, language, and learning disabilities, or behavioral disorders.²⁵ This is what happened to Colombo. He temporarily lost his ability to walk and he became profoundly deaf.

For hearing parents such as the Colombos, who had never met a deaf person, having a deaf child can bring on a constellation of painful and conflicting feelings ranging from shock, disbelief, fear, pain, sadness, anger, depression, confusion, and denial. Some parents run from doctor to doctor, preacher to preacher, palm-reader to palm reader, snake-oil salesman to snake-oil salesman in search of a different diagnosis, a homeopathic cure or restorative remedy through a religious avenue, a magic elixir, and quackery procedure, such as an airplane ride.²⁶ And so did the Colombos, so up into the sky they took their deaf son.²⁷ Throughout his life, Colombo repeated these flim-flam cures through aviation. Newspaper reporters noted that Colombo frequently would go up in airplanes with the “belief that the high altitude would help him regain his hearing.”²⁸ One reporter noted this about these airplane rides:

“Lt. G.H. McHenry, an army airman, is taking Leroy Colombo, a deaf-mute, on daily flights. Upon reaching an altitude of 11,000 feet, Lt. McHenry heads his plane straight for earth and drops like a plummet 7000 to 8000 feet. Colombo has reported that he can hear loud noises while the plane is diving and it is hoped eventually to restore his hearing completely.”²⁹

Other folk remedies for hearing loss existed. Colombo's brothers initiated a homeopathic physical therapy where they carried their younger deaf brother through the back alleys of their neighborhood that were paved with oyster shells to get him to use his legs and walk on the uneven shelled surface. Through these exercises, according to one family member, Colombo regained the use of his legs.³⁰

Paralysis from the illness is often temporary, but hearing loss is permanent, non-reversible, and cannot be fully regained from surgery, medication or with even assistive technology. Colombo's paralysis, or his deafness, did not keep him out of the Gulf of Mexico for long. Watching his brothers, Colombo learned how to swim. His mother and his uncles were opposed to letting him go into the water.³¹ Since Colombo had become deaf, his family was overprotective. Hearing mothers may be more controlling toward their deaf children who often grow up never being allowed to freely explore their environment.³² But still Colombo persisted. In his own words, he said:

"I learn myself. My uncles try to make me quit. They even tried to drown me, pushing my head underwater so I could not breathe. They wanted to break me from sneaking off, but they did not stop me."³³

Colombo's childhood took a dramatic shift in May 1913, when he was eight years old. Peter Colombo died of a heart attack, leaving behind his wife and eight children. His death brought significant family changes. Nick, the eldest son, became the family provider at the tender age of ten and continued this "father" role even into adulthood when his deaf brother became an adult. Nick quit school in the fifth grade to help support his mother and seven brothers and sisters, riding a bicycle around the island for Western Union delivering telegrams.³⁴ When times were hard and he needed money in later years, Colombo would often go to the backdoor of Nick's office or home and ask for money. Nick became Colombo's surrogate father. Such is the case in large families when the father is absent—physically, emotionally, or psychologically—children will search for "father substitutes" in their environment. Years later, Nick Colombo's son, Russ Colombo remarked in an interview, "My father never had a childhood."³⁵

Upon his Uncle "Cinto's" advice, the family sent Leroy to the Texas School for the Deaf in Austin. Reflecting back, Colombo acknowledges his uncles for their role in his life. In 1973, in an interview, Colombo said this:

"My uncle is H. J. Gaido. He owns Casey's and had a café at Murdoch house almost sixteen years before he passed away. He was the best I ever had and his brother, I really miss them both."³⁶

Colombo and his mother traveled over two hundred miles from Galveston to Austin to enroll in the Texas School for the Deaf in 1915 when he was ten years old.³⁷ Here Colombo formally entered the Deaf community learning to embrace its values such as the use of American Sign Language (ASL), the language used by more than two million deaf Canadians and Americans. He also entered the deaf culture, a community that has its own beliefs, values, and social organizations, including schools, clubs, history and heritage.³⁸ The deaf community was to provide Colombo with a support group who followed his lifeguard and racing career throughout his life, publishing stories and photographs about him in deaf periodicals such as the *Silent Worker* and the *Deaf American*.

The Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) was established by the Texas legislature in 1856. First called "The Texas Deaf and Dumb Asylum," the school enrolled eleven students and provided free education to deaf children and youth in Texas.³⁹ The terms deaf and dumb and asylum are no longer used in today's multicultural sensitive times. Deaf people prefer the term, "Deaf" for its cultural meanings. Today, the Deaf community is recognized as a cultural group with its own language, cultural beliefs, and values.⁴⁰ The TSD is presently staffed with experienced and state certified teachers, administrators, psychologists, and social workers who are fluent in ASL and knowledgeable about the Deaf culture. The school enrolls more than five hundred deaf and hard of hearing children from around the state. They have a comprehensive curriculum that contains academics, vocational programming, sports and after school club activities, and receive a first-class education.

At TSD, Colombo lived in a dormitory and attended classes with other deaf boys and girls. He learned

academics—reading, writing and arithmetic in the morning, and vocational trades such as shoemaking, tailoring, printing, bookkeeping, and typing in the afternoon. Since he arrived at school with speech and language skills in English he was placed in the oral class where the teachers drilled him on speech skills. While in the dormitories in the evening and in the cafeteria, he learned American Sign Language (ASL), a language which he used throughout his life with his Deaf friends and Deaf lifeguard colleagues.

Colombo adjusted to dormitory life as at home he lived with seven siblings; he was accustomed to community living. In the evenings he watched the movie picture machine, chatted with friends or played sports. During the warmer months, Colombo swam at Bull Creek, seven miles away from TSD, and here he further developed his strong swimming skills that he had begun in the Gulf.⁴¹ The deaf school became a second home for Colombo where he found a community of signers with whom he could communicate on more than a superficial level. It is here where he made lifelong deaf friends and maintained these supportive friendships throughout his life.⁴²

In 1922, Colombo left TSD. He and several of his classmates got into trouble on campus and were asked to leave. Dr. Felix B. Shuford, a medical doctor who was the superintendent for 1919 to 1923 was a strict disciplinarian who frequently expelled students for “disobedience and immoral behavior.”⁴³ During this time, TSD (or any school for that matter) did not have special education law and Behavioral Intervention Plans that would have kept Colombo in school. Even in 1922, for a deaf person, leaving school at such a young pre-vocational age of seventeen was a tragic mistake because it curtailed and restricted education and opportunities for future employment.

Colombo and his friends was invited to come back to TSD in 1923, but he decided to stay home in Galveston as he had begun to spend time on the beaches and wanted to be a lifeguard. The formal structured life at the school for the deaf was not to his liking as Colombo was a “free spirit” who spent most of his free time at the beach.

At TSD Colombo had full access to communication because everyone on campus used sign language. When he

returned to Galveston, Colombo became frustrated as none of his family had learned sign language. In an interview conducted in 1973, Colombo reflected back about his relationship with his mother.

"I used try be prize fighter but my mother stopped me so I start swim and won all races in Galveston. I am still champion...Mama took most of prizes—cash. If she'd learned to talk with fingers I could have explained. I had a gud mama."⁴⁴

"Talking with fingers" or sign language was stigmatized during Colombo's time. Hearing people were embarrassed to use it or to be seen with deaf people using it. During my interviews, I found none of Colombos surviving relatives (nephew and cousins) who ever saw Colombo use sign language.⁴⁵ I found only one hearing lifeguard colleague—A.R. (Babe) Schwartz, now a retired legislator and lobbyist who lives in Austin with his wife Marlyn, who used sign language with Colombo. According to Mr. Schwartz, Colombo taught him sign language and they used it together when he was a junior lifeguard working with Colombo.⁴⁶

Colombo may have internalized the negative feelings toward sign language from the hearing community around him who never learned to communicate with him in his language. Today there is greater openness about the learning of ASL among hearing family members of deaf people with many churches, community colleges, and universities offering classes and even bachelors and masters degrees in ASL and PhD degrees in ASL linguistics.

For the young Colombo, lifeguarding came naturally. In a news story, he said, "...I saved my first life when I was 12 and many others before I became a lifeguard at 15."⁴⁷

At age fifteen, in 1921 and just before he exited from the Texas School for the Deaf, Colombo and his brothers, Cinto and Nick were invited to join the Surf Tobaggan Club (S.T.C.). This was an elite group of volunteer lifeguards whose duties included keeping the beach clean, saving lives, and competing throughout the state in swimming races in Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The club also played sports: football and baseball, and also performed on the beach "turning handsprings for an hour or so dressed in their last year's bathing suits," as one reporter noted.⁴⁸

To earn the coveted S.T.C. membership, individuals were required to go through a grueling endurance test of swimming for three hours in the Gulf without using floating devices or floating on their backs. Colombo clocked in as one of the club's strongest swimmers. He swam fifteen miles in eleven hours. He was invited into the club with his brothers, all of whom had to follow the rule of the S.T.C. that members must swim in the Galveston surf at least once a week as well as pay dues of twenty-five cents a week.⁴⁹ For Colombo, swimming in the Gulf was part of his daily routine.

Leaving TSD, Colombo returned to Galveston and began his life as a lifeguard, seawater racer, and surfer. He also worked odd jobs as a restaurant waiter, worked at beach concession stands, and at night as a bouncer and night watchman at the Balinese Room Casino and Club, where he mixed with movie stars and the gambling underworld during the "Golden Era of Galveston Island."⁵⁰

Colombo's superb eye for detecting swimmers in distress earned him glory. His photograph in *The Galveston Daily News* was of a fit, tanned, muscular, and handsome young man holding large trophies surrounded by women at beach beauty pageants. But his life was not all glamour. There were emotional ruptures, losses, and leavings: losing his hearing to a childhood illness at age seven, losing his father to a deadly heart attack when he was just twelve, leaving the Texas School for the deaf before completing his education, several reported divorces, years of poverty living out of a car, sleeping on a cot in a beach concession stand, with the daily painful isolation of being surrounded by family and co-workers who did not share his sign language.

But by day, Colombo was happy, successful, and well-respected for his heroic deeds saving lives on the beach. His most often publicized and dramatic lifesaving event occurred when he was only twenty-three years of age. On March 13, 1928 he leaped off of Pier 20 to save two men, the captain and first-mate of the tugboat the *Propeller*. Colliding into a large barge full of oil, exploding, and catching fire, the tug boat plunged deep into the Gulf's harbor. Superman-like, Colombo dove into the icy March waters to rescue the men from burning debris before the sea patrol authorities

arrived.⁵¹ In his own words, Colombo provided riveting details for a news reporter.⁵²

"I was at Pier 20 waiting for a banana boat to come in and was sitting about 25 yards away from the tugboat when I felt the terrific explosion that set fire in the boat. I saw the flames and ran to get a hose about 25 feet from the tug, but it was rotten. I got trapped in the heavy smoke but finally found my way out. A man on the wharf told me two men were in the water and I went after them and rescued both of them at the same time. One of the men, Fred W. Barr, chief engineer of the tugboat, was exhausted and the other man was trying to get hold of me and I had to knock him out. I don't remember clearly what happened after I got them in, as I swallowed gas from the gas pipe which exploded and was out of my mind for about 30 minutes. I could not eat or drink for 24 hours and the gas tasted like poison."

A reporter in 1954 noted that, "For this feat, Colombo received a letter of gratitude from the wife of one of the men and a check for \$50."⁵³ The wife of one of the tugboat captains wrote movingly:

"We cannot express our appreciation for what you have done for us. You have given to me a husband, who I understand was nearly gone. For this I can never repay you. Words cannot express how I feel about this matter. All I can say is 'I Thank You.'"⁵⁴

For this heroic act, Galveston nominated Colombo to receive the Carnegie Medal, which he did not receive when one tugboat captain recanted his story.⁵⁵

Once a reporter asked Colombo if people were appreciative when he saved their lives. Colombo responded: "No, in fact, they seem embarrassed. Some cross the street to keep from meeting me face to face. The only reward I ever received was when I saved a dog from drowning. The owner gave me \$25."⁵⁶

There are other examples of "rescuees-behaving-badly." Once Colombo saved two girls from drowning. While their

father promised him two cases of beer, he only gave him two cans. In a similar incident when Colombo saved a fifteen-year-old newsboy, bystanders took up a collection of only one dollar. Colombo was once rewarded twenty-five dollars for saving a dog and retrieving a pair of false teeth from the Gulf.⁵⁷

In another dramatic lifesaving event, a reporter wrote about Colombo's rescue of shrimp boat sailors in distress:

"They saw a shrimp boat burning near San Luis Pass. The crewmen jumped and managed to reach a tiny nearby island. A plane flying in the vicinity attempted a rescue, but the pilot could find no place for a landing. Colombo and Thompson swam to the island, cleared a landing space for the plane to come in and effect the rescue."⁵⁸

To understand Colombo's remarkable achievements as a lifeguard, one must understand the Gulf's bi-polar personality. On its surface, it can be calm with gentle rolling waves, but underneath it has hidden deep holes, crevices, sandbars, barnacle-covered jetties, and dangerous rip currents or undertow that pull out to sea unsuspecting swimmers to drowning deaths. A swimmer's first reaction is to fight the rip current, swimming against it in a struggle to reach shore. Knowledgeable swimmers will "go with the flow" swimming diagonally to the rip current to allow the surf to ease them out of it. Typically, inexperienced swimmers panic, fight and drown, unless Colombo or another lifeguard saves them.

World War II brought hundreds of vacationing soldiers to Galveston's beaches. When he was thirty-eight-years-old, on a beach crowded with soldiers, he saved nineteen lives.⁵⁹ Colombo was quoted in the Galveston Daily News:

"...a soldier kept climbing up Murdoch's Pier and diving off the cross supports between the pilings. I couldn't make him come down. Finally, he dived and broke his neck. I pulled him out and took him to the hospital, but he died the next day."⁶⁰

Reporters called Colombo, a "veteran lifeguard" who on April 22, 1945, saved four swimmers near the municipal

pier who got caught up in these treacherous rip tides.⁶¹

"Ethelyn Sandlier, Madeline Gerson and Max Goldberg, all Houston residents were pulled one at a time from the surf by Colombo about 1 o'clock when they became in distress about 200 yards from shore. The two women were semi-conscious when they were rescued, but revived without the aid of artificial respiration, Colombo said. The soldier, James Lekanidis, who became in distress near the same location some time later, was clinging precariously to the pilings under the municipal pier when Colombo came to his rescue and helped him regain shore. Lekanidis suffered lacerations and bruises on the chest and body as the surf rocked him against the pilings, the lifeguard said."

In another attempt, Colombo was notified of a swimmer in trouble as he ate his lunch at the 21st Street Pier Café. A reporter noted: "...He dived from the pier into the water... Colombo pulled the body to shore and administered artificial respiration on the beach...and in the ambulance on route to the hospital."⁶²

In still another rescue, Colombo saved two tourists from Corpus Christi, TX. The *Galveston Daily News* reported that the two: "...could not escape the current and were swept against barnacle-covered pilings."⁶³ Colombo's lifesaving attempts even involved automobiles. When a car plunged off the seawall and spilled its driver into the Gulf waters, Colombo grabbed the dazed motorist who had groped toward shore.⁶⁴ In 1964, Colombo saved a family of three who were in trouble around the rock groin at 57th Street and Seawall Boulevard. A reporter noted the rescue.

"A mother went out about 11 am. to help her son who was having trouble after swimming too close to the groin. She found herself in danger. Her oldest daughter went out after her, but got into the same situation. A second daughter was on her way out when Colombo noticed them and went to their

Leroy Colombo

aid. He brought back all four to the beach. He gave artificial respiration to the mother and the son, who were taken to John Sealy Hospital, along with the oldest daughter to be treated for cuts and bruises.”⁶⁵

Russ Colombo, his nephew, also reported that he was once saved by his uncle when Russ was trying to help six people out in the water:

“Uncle Leroy had atypical ways of saving people. He would knock them out then drag them to shore. He would pull women by their hair. In those times, he often used a steel buoy, octagonal in shape with handles and ropes on it. He would always keep them above water.”⁶⁶

Galveston’s Police Chief D.K. Lack said this about Colombo in a newspaper interview in 1974:

“He swam like a porpoise. His eyesight was so sharp. He saved more people than I ever heard or knew. He was one of the greatest lifeguards that ever lived. I know where he saved three people at one time, and once, four. He could sense anything going on in the water and see it before anyone else did. He’s a legend in the city of Galveston.”⁶⁷

Indeed, Colombo had a record of saving 907 lives as recorded in the 1976 *Guinness Book of World Records*.⁶⁸ The passage reads:

“Life saving. In November, 1974, the City of Galveston, Texas and the Noon Optimist Club unveiled a plaque to the deaf-mute lifeguard Leroy Colombo (1905-74), who saved 907 people from drowning in the waters around Galveston Island, from 1917 to his death.”

Others reported that Colombo had saved a thousand lives, and he had a record of thirty-eight failed attempts of saving drowning swimmers.⁶⁹ We can only speculate exactly how many lives he saved.

Even if Colombo had saved only one life, he would be

a hero by anyone's standards. It is ludicrous for a hero of Colombo's caliber to be included in a book cataloging circus-like, freak-show events written to amuse, shock, and entertain such as *Guinness*. For example, above the 1976 *Guinness* citation of Colombo's lifesaving records is another record of fourteen students in high school who went leap-frogging and averaged forty-two leaps for each of the four hundred laps for twenty-three hours and eleven minutes. Another entry reports on a record of the only living man, called "the human lightning conductor" who was struck by lightning five times and still lived. Another record is of a lion-tamer who mastered and fed forty lions at the same time.⁷⁰ How can leap-frogging, being struck by lightning, and lion taming-feeding feats compare to saving a human life?

On the other hand, history shows that Colombo had a flashy, colorful, and charismatic personality that dazzled crowds. He would have relished to see his entry in *Guinness*. He was an entertainer.

His marine lifeguard buddies remember him as a funny guy who liked to tell stories to entertain and amuse. "Leroy is the comedian of the beach boys (lifeguards) He keeps them laughing with their antics. Leroy's description of what he will do when he comes across the next rich man in distress is a good for a laugh."⁷¹ In Colombo's words:

"The next time I find a rich man drowning, I'm going to get a float and go out to him. Then while he is trying to stay on top of the water, I'm going to bargain with him. I'm going to ask him to put the money in my hand before I make the move to save him. If he refuses, I will turn around and head for shore leaving him to the mercy of the sea."⁷²

Jesting, of course, Colombo was. He was often seen playing horseshoes with both millionaires and the poor; he made no distinction among the financial status of swimmers whom he rescued. Neither was he affected by the drowning victim's race as shown in his quote that began this article. This was noteworthy given that Colombo lived during the South's "Jim Crow" era with its strict rules for racial

segregation.

Here are some examples of the witty Colombo, the jokester. He was once asked how he won so many races. He reported that his "magic potion" always left him feeling fine by the end of the race.⁷³ In his words, "I put eight small bottles of whiskey and sugar under my skull cap before the race, and when I get tired, I flop over on back and down one."⁷⁴ In still another story about a clever and shrewd Colombo, during Prohibition he would swim cases of bootleg liquor onto Galveston's beach from boats in the Gulf.⁷⁵

His flamboyant personality and colorful character was captured in a 1947 newspaper photograph. He stood with his masculine, hairy chest bared, in his swimming trunks wearing a captain's cap jauntily askew, a long cigar protruding from his teeth, holding a beer bottle in his right hand and his left arm wrapped around a curvaceous woman in a two-piece bathing suit wearing spiked high-heels. This attractive movie-star couple stood together in the sudsy Gulf surf's edge. To a reporter, in a 'George Burns fashion,' the witty Colombo quipped, "This is all the training I need to whip a Fort Worth cowboy." Colombo was referring to his competitor in an upcoming race with Roy P. Sutter who was from Dallas and dubbed by the press as "the cowboy creek and lake-trained long distance swimmer."⁷⁶

Colombo also inspired the young in more serious matters as career choices. As a young boy, Vic Maceo who is now the retired head of Galveston's Beach Patrol, said this about Colombo:

"I knew him when I was a boy about 10 years old. He inspired me to become a lifeguard. My memories of him...he used to walk up and down the beach with a whistle. When he saw swimmers out far, he would whistle and motion them in and then ball them out using his deaf speech...."Two damn deep!" he would cuss at them and he would kick them off the beach."⁷⁷

Vic Maceo had another lighter memory. "In the summer, Leroy would swim out to the shrimp boats that

were anchored not far from the beach. He would get several pounds of shrimp in a bag and swim back to the beach doing the backstroke with the shrimp on his chest. " 78

While he packaged himself as a funny, burly, handsome, tanned, ladies man, so colorful and charismatic in his public demeanor, on the job, Colombo was a serious and highly-skilled lifeguard. Some thought he had a mysterious "sixth sense," which he used to spot and identify a drowning person. This is what his sister-in-law, Mrs. Nick Colombo reported:

"He had a sixth sense about saving lives. He brought many back that are walking around today. He would work on a person and bring him back to life after others gave up. He would ride in the ambulance to the hospital and bring them back. It was a God-given sense. From the time he started until the time he retired, he saved over a thousand people." 79

I contend that rather than possessing a mysterious sixth sense, Colombo simply used his visual attention and motion detection abilities to recognize a swimmer in distress. Indeed, some researchers report that deaf persons have enhanced visual attention, visual perception, and motion detection skills. They can shift visual attention, scan visual stimuli faster, detect visual motion faster, and recognize faces more rapidly than hearing persons and even deaf persons who do not use sign language.⁸⁰ Since they do not hear the screams of the gulls, the noise of the surf, and the general din of people—particularly laughing, shouting children on the beach—they can focus on visual stimuli in the water.

Today the formal training of lifeguards takes into account the very scanning and visual acuity techniques that Colombo and other Galveston lifeguards used regularly on the beach. While they experienced eye fatigue, glare and stress, they remained always vigilant to their swimmers in the water, and could detect a stressed swimmer fairly quickly.⁸¹

While serious on the job, Colombo also enjoyed the

spectator's limelight. He often played to his audiences' adoration of him. After winning races in the Gulf, a reporter said: "Colombo answered the cheers of the crowd at the finish by climbing into a lifeboat, shaking his hands above his head, then beating his chest in Tarzan-like fashion."⁸²

The boyhood and early adult life experiences shaped Colombo's identity as a superb athlete and expert lifeguard who saved hundreds of tourists and locals from near drowning deaths. His actions and colorful personality captured the attention of the media and local Galveston leaders who were marketing Galveston in the 1920's to the 1950's as a vacation resort, as a safe place to bring family and friends to vacation. With Colombo's watchful eyes, few drowned. Colombo's identity as a Deaf man began with his entry in the Deaf culture via the Texas School for the Deaf, which gave him a language, an education, and a network of deaf friends. Indeed, Colombo was bilingual in two languages: ASL and English. He was also bicultural in two cultures: the Deaf culture and the hearing culture. But as I will describe in Part II, his life was not all glamour and glory. In later years, Colombo suffered from ill-health and this led to his death at age 69 from heart failure with complications.

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(Endnotes)

¹ Norris McWhirter and Ross McWhirter. *Guinness Book of World Records*. (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 1976), 473.

² Author interview with Dr. Jim Marquette, September 12, 2003. Dr. Marquette also provided the author with a typed interview he conducted with Leroy Colombo on April 18, 1973. The reader may notice lack of grammar in this verbatim excerpt. Deaf individuals who lose their hearing in childhood have difficulty with the English language because they no longer hear the grammatical patterns. That is why deaf children need special school to work on regaining their English skills that their hearing loss caused them to forfeit. Jean F. Andrews, Irene Leigh & Mary T. Weiner. *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology* (2004). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

³ The capital D in Deaf is the convention used to signify member of the Deaf community who uses American Sign Language (ASL), attended a school for the deaf, and belongs to deaf organizations.

⁴ Gary Cartwright. *Galveston: A History of the Island*. (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1991).

⁵ Lifeguard Services in the United States: A Brief History. http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/lifeguard/04_History.htm, accessed February 27, 2010.

⁶ The term BOI or Born on the Island was first cited in The Galveston Daily News, June 8, 1956, 5. <http://www.barrypopik.com> (accessed May 17, 2009).

⁷ Author interview with Jerry Hassell, October 4, 2003.

⁸ Written communication about baptismal dates of Colombo

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and his siblings was provided by Lisa May Archivist, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, March 1, 2007. Document provided by Don Mize.

⁹ Written communication on Insurance Board Records provided by Carol Wood, Archivist, History Center, Rosenberg Library. Insurance Board Records show that the date the house was built is now known, but the house was considered old by 1903, two years before Colombo was born.

¹⁰ (see above).

¹¹ Jodi Wright-Gidley and Jennifer Marines. *Galveston, a City on Stilts*. (Charleston, S.C. Arcadia Publishing, Co., 2008), 37.

¹² Author interview with Michael Gaido, September 12, 2003.

¹³ Valentine J. Belfiglio. *The Italian Experience in Texas: A Closer Look* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1995), 120.

¹⁴ Valentine J. Belfiglio, *The Italian Experience in Texas: A Closer Look*, 132.

¹⁵ Written communication about baptismal dates of Colombo and his siblings was provided by Lisa May Archivist, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, March 1, 2007.

¹⁶ Author interview with Russ Colombo, August 9, 2009.

¹⁷ E-mail message to the author, April 9, 2007, Don Mize provided information from the Galveston City Directory, written document from the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

¹⁸ Wright-Gidley and Jennifer Marines, *Galveston, a City on Stilts*, 13

¹⁹ Ray Miller. *Ray Miller's Galveston* (Gulf Publishing Co., 1983), 155.

²⁰ Author interview with Michael Gaido, September 12, 2003

²¹ Gary Cartwright. *Galveston: A History of the Island*. 1991, 10; Written communication provided to the author by Don Mize on April 10, 2007. Email message from Don Mize to Casey Edward Greene, Head of Special Collections at the Rosenberg Library on April 10, 2007. According to these records, the first Murdoch's Bathhouse was built in 1898, then was destroyed by the 1900 storm. Gaido's Café, operated by San Jacinto Gaido (Leroy Colombo's uncle) was above Murdoch's. The Galveston City Directories, 1921 through 1932-33 listed in at 2215 Seawall. Gaido's

Restaurant, 3838 Seawall, was operated by Michael Gaido

²² Author interview with Dr. Jim Marquette, September 12, 2003.

²³ These citations were provided by Dr. James Baer. Texas Cerebrospinal Meningitis Epidemic of 1911-1912: Saving Lives with New York City Immune Serum. http://www.semp.us/publications/biot_printview.php?BiotID=39. Last retrieved February 4, 2010.

²⁴ This article was provided to me by Dr. James Baer. Simon Flexner: "The results of the serum treatment in thirteen hundred cases of epidemic meningitis" in *Journal of Experimental Medicine* May 1913, 17:556, <http://www.jem.org/egi/reprint?17/5/53?maxtoshow=&HITS=10&hits=10&RESULTFORMAT=1&author1=flexner%>. Last retrieved February 4, 2010.

²⁵ McCay Vernon, "Sociological and psychological factors associated with profound hearing loss," *Speech and Hearing Research* 12 (1969), 541-63.; Jean F. Andrews, Irene Leigh and Mary T. Weiner. *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology*. (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2004), 41-42.

²⁶ Andrews, Leigh and Weiner, *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology* 54-55, 158-59.

²⁷ Author Interview with Priscilla Garbadne, September 15, 2003.

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²⁹ "Mahan May Try Air Ride to Restore His Hearing," *San Antonio Light*, June 22, 1927, 9.

³⁰ Author interview with Priscilla Garbade, September 15, 2003.; Gini Fendler-Brown and Max Rizley, Jr. *Galveston Lore, Legend, & Downright Lies*. (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2000), 36-37.

³¹ Author interview with Marquette.

³² Andrews, Leigh and Weiner, *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology*, 160-163.

³³ Author Interview with Marquette.

³⁴ Author interview with Russ Colombo.

³⁵ Author Interview with Russ Colombo.

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³⁶ Author interview with Russ Colombo.

³⁷ Author interview with Frann Camendish, October, 2, 2004. Frann Camendish provided a written document of the enrollment records signed by the Colombo family. Document is at the Heritage House Museum, the Texas School for the Deaf, Austin, Texas.

³⁸ Andrews, Leigh and Weiner, *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology*, 16-35.

³⁹ Sharon Kay Crawford Forestal Hovinga. *Texas School for the Deaf Sesquicentennial: A Proud Tradition*. (Austin: Historical Publications, Inc., 2001), xi, xii.

⁴⁰ Andrews, Leigh, Weiner, *Deaf People: Evolving Perspectives in Psychology, Education and Sociology*.

⁴¹ Author interview with Jerry Hassell, October 4, 2003.

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⁴³ Sharon Kay Crawford Forestal Hovinga, *Texas School for the Deaf Sesquicentennial: A Proud Tradition*, 210.

⁴⁴ Author interview with Marquette.

⁴⁵ Author interview with Vic Maceo, March 9, 2004.; Author interview with Mike Gaido, September 12, 2003.; Author interview with Priscilla Garbade, Sept. 15, 2003.; Author interview with Russ Colombo, August 9, 2004,

⁴⁶ Author interview with Babe and Marlyn Schwartz, August 9, 2009.

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⁶⁶ Author interview with Russ Colombo.

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